

# CHAMPIONS OF CHANGE

## The Impact of Arts on Learning

As a result of their varied inquiries, the *Champions of Change* researchers found that learners can attain higher levels of achievement through their engagement with the arts. Moreover, one of the critical research findings is that the learning in and through the arts can help “level the playing field” for youngsters from disadvantaged circumstances.

James Catterall’s analysis of the Department of Education’s database of 25,000 students demonstrates that students with high levels of arts participation outperform “arts-poor” students by virtually every measure. Since arts participation is highly correlated with socioeconomic status, which is the most significant predictor of academic performance, this comes as little surprise. The size and diversity of the database, however, permitted Catterall to find statistical significance in comparisons of high and low arts participants in the lowest socioeconomic segments. This closer look showed that high arts participation makes a more significant difference to students from low-income backgrounds than for high-income students. Catterall also found clear evidence that sustained involvement in particular art forms—music and theatre—are highly correlated with success in mathematics and reading.

These findings are enriched by comparisons of student achievement in 14 high-poverty schools in which the Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education (CAPE) has developed innovative arts-integrated curricula. The inspiring turnaround of this large and deeply troubled school district is one of the important education stories of this decade. Schools across Chicago, including all those in this study, have been improving student performance. But, when compared to arts-poor schools in the same neighbourhoods, the CAPE schools advanced even more quickly and now boast a significant gap in achievement along many dimensions.

Schools are not the only venue in which young people grow, learn, and achieve. Shirley Brice Heath spent a decade studying dozens of after-school programs for disadvantaged youth. These programs were broadly clustered into three categories—sports/academic, community involvement, and the arts. This research shows that the youth in all these programs were doing better in school and in their personal lives than were young people from the same socioeconomic categories.

To the researchers’ surprise, however, the youth in the arts programs were doing the best. Sceptical about this finding, Heath and her colleagues looked more closely at the arts programs and the youth participating in them. Although the youth in the arts programs were actually at greater “risk” than those in the other programs, the researchers found that characteristics particular to the arts made those programs more effective. They now believe that a combination of “roles, risks, and rules” offered in the arts programs had a greater impact on these young lives.

Another broad theme emerges from the individual *Champions of Change* research findings: the arts no longer need to be characterised solely by either their ability to promote learning in specific arts disciplines or by their ability to promote learning in other disciplines. These studies suggest a more dynamic, less either-or model for the arts and overall learning that has more of the appearance of a rotary with entrances and exits than of a linear one-way street.

This rotary of learning provides the greater access to higher levels of achievement. "Learning in and Through the Arts" (LITA) and other *Champions of Change* studies found much evidence that learning in the arts has significant effects on learning in other domains. LITA suggests a dynamic model in which learning in one domain supports and stimulates learning in others, which in turn supports and stimulates learning in a complex web of influence described as a "constellation." LITA and the other researchers provide compelling evidence that student achievement is heightened in an environment with high quality arts education offerings and a school climate supportive of active and productive learning.

## Why the Arts Change the Learning Experience

When well taught, the arts provide young people with authentic learning experiences that engage their minds, hearts, and bodies. The learning experiences are real and meaningful for them.

While learning in other disciplines may often focus on development of a single skill or talent, the arts regularly engage multiple skills and abilities. Engagement in the arts—whether the visual arts, dance, music, theatre or other disciplines—nurtures the development of cognitive, social, and personal competencies. Although the *Champions of Change* researchers conducted their investigations and presented their findings independently, a remarkable consensus exists among their findings:

- **The arts reach students who are not otherwise being reached.**

Young people who are disengaged from schools and other community institutions are at the greatest risk of failure or harm. The researchers found that the arts provided a reason, and sometimes the only reason, for being engaged with school or other organisations. These young people would otherwise be left without access to any community of learners. The studies concerning ArtsConnection, CAPE, and learning during non-school hours are of particular significance here.

- **The arts reach students in ways that they are not otherwise being reached.**

Other recent educational research has produced insights into different styles of learning. This research also addresses examples of young people who were considered classroom failures, perhaps "acting out" because conventional classroom practices were not engaging them. These "problem" students often became the high-achievers in arts learning settings. Success in the arts became a bridge to learning and eventual success in other areas of learning. The ArtsConnection study provides case studies of such students; the "Learning In and Through the Arts" research examines the issue of learner self-perception in great depth.

- **The arts connect students to themselves and each other.**

Creating an artwork is a personal experience. The student draws upon his or her personal resources to generate the result. By engaging his or her whole person, the student feels invested in ways that are deeper than "knowing the answer." Beyond the individual, Steve Seidel and Dennie Palmer Wolf show how effective arts learning communities are formed and operated. James Catterall also describes how the attitudes of young people toward one another are altered through their arts learning experiences.

- **The arts transform the environment for learning.**

When the arts become central to the learning environment, schools and other settings become places of discovery. According to the Teachers College research team and those examining the CAPE schools, the very school culture is changed, and the conditions for learning are improved. Figurative walls between classrooms and disciplines are broken down. Teachers are renewed. Even the physical appearance of a school building is transformed through the representations of learning. The Heath research team also found "visible" changes in non-school settings.

- **The arts provide learning opportunities for the adults in the lives of young people.**

Those held responsible for the development of children and youth—teachers, parents, and other adults—are rarely given sufficient or significant opportunities for their own continuing education. With adults participating in lifelong learning, young people gain an understanding that learning in any field is a never-ending process. The roles of the adults are also changed—in effective programs, the adults become coaches—active facilitators of learning. Heath and other researchers here describe the altered dynamics between young and less young learners.

- **The arts provide new challenges for those students already considered successful.**

Boredom and complacency are barriers to success. For those young people who outgrow their established learning environments, the arts can offer a chance for unlimited challenge. In some situations described in the research, older students may also teach and mentor younger students. In others, young people gain from the experience of working with professional artists. The ArtsConnection researchers in general, and James Catterall in particular, explored the impact of intensive involvement in specific art disciplines.

- **The arts connect learning experiences to the world of real work.**

The world of adult work has changed, and the arts learning experiences described in the research show remarkable consistency with the evolving workplace. Ideas are what matter, and the ability to generate ideas, to bring ideas to life and to communicate them is what matters to workplace success. Working in a classroom or a studio as an artist, the young person is learning and practising future workplace behaviours.

## Arts Competencies and Other Disciplines

Taken together, the cumulative data offer a very evocative, complex, and multi-dimensional picture of arts learning. A consistent factor emerged, namely, that the appearance of arts competencies in other disciplines was found in contexts where, for example:

- There was a need for pupils to figure out or elaborate on ideas on their own;
- There was a need to structure and organise thinking in light of different kinds of experiences;
- Knowledge needed to be tested or demonstrated in new and original ways; and
- Learning involved task persistence, ownership, empathy, and collaboration with others.

For instance, these competencies were called upon when a theory in science could be understood more fully through the construction of a three dimensional mobile; or when a mathematical problem could be approached more easily through a closely observed drawing of a shell; or when a Pythagorean theorem became clear through the creation of a drama confronting social class; or when a moral dilemma could be focussed more fully through the creation of an opera.

In subjects such as science, mathematics, and language, invitations to accommodate conflicting ideas, to formulate new and better ways of representing thoughts, and to take risks and leaps call forth a complex of cognitive and creative capacities. These capacities are typical of arts learning. Indeed, what is particularly interesting about this grouping of responses is that it reveals a rich interweaving of intuitive, practical, and logical forms of thought at work advancing the range and depth of children's thinking. This kind of mix of intuitive and logical thinking is, of course, highly typical of most creative artists, scientists, and thinkers in general. At a more mundane level, it also characterises how we deal with the challenges of everyday living!

## Relationship of Arts Learning to Other School Disciplines

A number of recent studies have investigated the effects of learning in the arts upon other subjects. Not only have the results of these investigations been unclear but they have been much in dispute. On the one hand, it has been argued that learning in the arts is context bound, specific and important in and of itself. On the other hand, it has been suggested that learning in the arts is more general and plays a critical role in serving and supporting other disciplines.

In essence, the study reveals that learning in the arts is complex and multi-dimensional. A set of cognitive competencies – including elaborative and creative thinking, fluency, originality, focussed perception, and imagination – could be grouped to form constellations in particular instructional contexts. These contexts elicit the ability to take multiple perspectives, to layer relationships, and to construct and express meaning in unified forms of representation.

These competencies have been called “habits of mind” rather than higher order thinking, as is more usual because this term captures more fully the flexible interweaving of intuitive, practical, and logical modes of thought that characterises arts learning.

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Edited by Edward B Fiske

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These habits of mind are accompanied by an array of personal dispositions such as risk taking, task persistence, ownership of learning, and perceptions of academic accomplishment in school. Since these habits of mind and dispositions are prevalent in schools where children have studied the arts continuously over time and have experienced learning in several arts, they are typical of arts learning itself.

This learning is not only characteristic of the arts, in arts-rich schools. Certain features of it are evident in other subject disciplines when specific task demands call them into being. The relationship between arts learning and learning in other disciplines therefore may not be as unidirectional - from the arts to other disciplines - as other studies have implied. Rather, the relationship may be more dynamic and interactive than is usually acknowledged. In other words we question whether transfer - or a one to one correspondence whereby one discipline serves another - is the only, or even appropriate, way to conceptualise the relationship across disciplines. The unidirectional model is much too simplistic and ill serves the complexity of thinking involved in learning.

When well grounded, the arts develop children's minds in powerful ways. In arts learning young people become adept at dealing with high levels of ambivalence and uncertainty, and they become accustomed to discovering internal coherence among conflicting experiences. Since young people live in worlds that present them with different beliefs, moralities, and cultures, schools should be the place where learning fosters the reconciliation of apparent differences.

In arts-rich schools, where conversations take place across the disciplinary boundaries, young people learn that mathematics might challenge the arts to examine relationships among objects in ways that extend their conceptions of numbers. Similarly, in the back-and-forth between science and art, pupils learn that close observation and investigation of natural phenomena can proceed either according to prescribed theories or according to personal perceptions-and that both types of investigations offer fresh understanding of the same phenomena. The transmission of feelings and meaning captured in language learning offers a challenge to the arts to discover how such experiences assume new and different layers of interpretation if encoded in images, movements, or musical sounds.

In such cross-disciplinary conversations involving the arts, young people are given permission to go beyond what they already know and to move towards new horizons for their learning.

## **Educational Implications of the Study**

The results of the study offer empirical evidence that learning in arts-rich schools is complex and that it is most successful when supported by a rich, continuous, and sequenced curriculum. We also have clear empirical evidence that children, in what we have called the low-arts schools, ~~are less able to extend their thinking~~. It appears that a narrowly conceived curriculum, in which the arts are either not offered or are offered in limited and sporadic amounts, exerts a negative effect on the development of critical cognitive competencies and personal dispositions.

Arts -rich schools offer a picture of a curriculum that is neither formalised nor centralised, but rather is open and flexible. Within these schools it was clear that teachers thought about, and accepted, a variety of different ways for pupils to be creative, to exercise skills and to think through problems, and exercise imagination in the construction of paintings,

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musical compositions, choreography, and plays. This suggests that a flexible curriculum which paces in-depth arts experiences to a sensitive appreciation of developmental needs leads to learning that combines the kind of persistence and confidence necessary for academic accomplishment.

An ideal curriculum would enable the arts teachers to collaborate with each other, with teachers from other disciplines, and with visiting artists and other arts providers. This kind of curriculum requires careful planning. Teachers need the time to collaborate in disciplinary and cross-disciplinary groups in order to research and frame the learning to which they will contribute. They will also need administrative support in arranging the daily timetable so that pupils have long stretches of time in which to research and try out ideas and to stretch their thinking as far as it will go - both within and across disciplines.

The arts are neither ancillary nor core but rather they are participants in the development of critical ways of thinking and learning. In schools with rich arts provision this argument can be sustained on the basis of the constellation of capacities that are nurtured in arts learning and that characterise the dialectical relationship between the arts and other subjects. By contrast, in schools with a paucity of arts provision the arts may well be considered ancillary because they do not have the capacity to promote the ways of thinking that, by interacting dynamically with other subject domains, offer children generative and complex learning.

If schools hope to offer a curriculum of study designed to help children develop as productive thinkers and citizens - and sometimes as artists - then they must not force them into narrow channels by depriving them of the kind of learning challenges that develop the richness of their minds.

## **Policy Implications of the Study**

Given the findings presented here, schools should develop and offer to their pupils a critical mass of arts subjects in visual arts, music, dance, and drama. Within this provision young people must be allowed to study as fully as possible across the arts disciplines. Research results show very clearly that the habits of mind and personal dispositions needed for academic success were nurtured in high-arts schools where young people had pursued several arts over a duration of time. There was a negative correlation between schools with a paucity of arts instruction and all cognitive and personal dimensions of the study. Thus, schools interested in nurturing complex minds should provide a critical mass of arts instruction over the duration of young people's school lives.

While arts learning is unique, in participation with other disciplines, it serves the cause of promoting the intellectual development of young people. The double face of arts learning - its simultaneous openness and closedness - gives it a special role in the curriculum. Educational policy, therefore needs to bear in mind that in the best possible world neither arts learning nor learning in other subjects is sufficient unto itself. As is clear from the study, just because school subjects are different does not mean they are precluded from being able to work together beneficially.

## The Need for Well Educated Teachers

This study found that teachers in the high-arts schools were more open, flexible, knowledgeable, and engaged in their own ongoing learning than were teachers in the low-arts schools. It seems clear that if we want to develop complex arts instructions, with all that it implies for people's learning and development, then we need a school arts policy that calls for a more rigorous and ongoing education for teachers.

We need teachers who - through their own experience in the arts - are complex, reflective thinkers and practitioners, have knowledge about the young people they teach and the cultures that define them. Arts teachers need to be able to balance teaching both in and across their disciplines, which implies the ability to be collaborative and aware of possibilities for learning beyond their own specialisations.

## Conclusion

Arts learning, involving as it does the construction, interweaving, and interpretation of personal and socio-cultural meaning, calls upon a constellation of capacities and dispositions which are layered and unified in the construction of forms we call paintings, poems, musical compositions, and dances. Many of these same competencies and dispositions extend to other subject domains where they coalesce in equally distinctive forms - mathematical, scientific, linguistic - as pupils organise different kinds of meaning, insight, and understanding.

What is critical is not that capacities and dispositions transfer from the arts to other subject areas, as has often been argued, but that they are exercised broadly across different knowledge domains. Given this interpretation, no subject has prior rights over any other subjects, for to diminish one is to diminish the possibility and promise of them all. If the arts are to help define our path to the future, they need to become curriculum partners with other subject disciplines in ways that will allow them to contribute their own distinctive richness and complexity to the learning process as a whole.